

Man-Woman Complementarity: The Catholic Inspiration
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Lecture I: Ancient Roots

Part I: Sr. Prudence Allen, RSM: Philosophical Aspects

*"Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit
As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be world without end. Amen"*

It is a joy for us to be with you for this series of three lectures on philosophical and theological aspects of what we are calling "The Catholic Inspiration for Complementarity of Woman and Man." We will set forth a structure of philosophical and theological components in each of our lectures, and ~~then~~ we hope that in the dialogue that follows a greater depth of discussion will take place. In each lecture the philosophical underpinnings of a particular historical period in western thought will be elaborated first by myself, and then a Sacrament will be developed by Sr. Moira Debono to reveal ecclesial applications of the same principles.

The basic premise of the three lectures is that every time man-woman relations moved out of balance in western thought or practice, someone - a philosopher and/or a theologian - responding to a deep source of Catholic inspiration sought ways to bring the balance back.

What do we mean by "out of balance?" To answer that question I would like to present a simple schema of three types of theory of sex and gender identity. [You may refer to them on the Chart handout or the handout sheet, if you prefer] There are two basic principles for any kind of

*The overview
work sheet
handout*

They can be seen in
complementarity which we can derive from the complementarity of the wave and particle theory of light for which the Nobel prize in physics was awarded, from interdisciplinary studies with complementary fields in academia, and from the complementarity of man and woman. Thus, the two basic principles of complementarity are operative in secular as well as theological contexts.

The first principle of complementarity is that each of the two components identified as complementary must have equal dignity and worth. For short we can call this the principle of equality. The second principle of complementarity is that each component of the complementary relation must be significantly different from the other. For short we can call this the principle of significant difference. A third principle of complementarity, when the theory is applied to personal relations, is that the two components, in our case man and woman, are called into a relation of knowledge and love with one another.

If any one of the fundamental principles is missing, the complementarity disappears. In the case of ~~woman and man~~ sex and gender identity, we will see that when the principle of equality of man and woman is missing, we have a polarity in which one sex is considered by nature to be superior to the other. Traditionally, following Aristotle's philosophy, the male was considered by nature superior to the female. We can call this 'traditional gender polarity.' Since the Renaissance, and frequently today, different theories have been proposed for the female being naturally superior to male. For short, we can refer to this theory as 'reverse gender polarity.'

In a similar way, if the principle of significant difference is missing, the complementarity also disappears. We call this theory by the popular name 'unisex.' In the case of ~~man + woman~~ sex and gender identity both Platonic and Cartesian arguments provided a foundation for the

unisex theory. As Socrates proposed in Book V of the *Republic*, if there are no significant differences in the nature of the male and female, then they should do the same things.

Complementarity theory itself has had two different stages of development. Up until the 20th century a kind of fractional complementarity continued to be articulated. In this theory, each component of the complementarity provided only a fraction of the whole. Bringing the two components into a relation of addition can be symbolized by the following: $\frac{1}{2} + \frac{1}{2} = 1$ or $\frac{1}{3} + \frac{2}{3} = 1$ and so forth. We can call this theory a 'fractional complementarity.' Even though fractional complementarity appeared to be seeking a balance when both polarity and unisex arguments were dominating the culture, it turns out that this model is not ultimately accurate about the human condition.

Instead, a new kind of complementarity is needed, one that respects the wholeness of an individual woman or man. I call this theory 'integral complementarity' because each of the components, a someone, in the complementarity relation is considered as a whole (like an integer). When, the individual man and individual woman enter into a complementarity relation with one another something more happens. This synergetic effect can be symbolically represented by 1 + 1 generates 3. It is obvious how this occurs in a family when children are generated, but I would suspect that some of you have had this experience in interdisciplinary studies, where each person brings to the study the integral methodology and knowledge base of his or her own discipline, and ~~discuss that~~ yet in the interaction something more happens than the simple sum of the different participants.

When either the principle of equality is missing or the principle of significant difference is missing, the same kind of synergetic effect does not occur. Instead, a kind of stasis or

sterility is often the result. By analogy, both polarity and unisex models of man-woman relations have a kind of deadening effect on at least one, or both of the participants.

Why do we call Complementarity a "Catholic Inspiration?" We can offer two basic reasons. First when considering complementarity "from above" we can notice that the Holy Trinity as a Communion of Three Divine Persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, offers a definitive Revelation of a spiritual complementarity. Each Divine Person is of equal dignity and worth as the other; and each Divine Person is significantly different from the other, by virtue of their Relations of Paternity, Filiation, and Procession. Yet, through their inter-relation of Common Spiration something more happens. The world was created, each of our eternal souls was created, and we are regenerated and called into communion of knowledge and love through grace by participation in the divine life of the Holy Trinity. The action of the Holy Trinity, the Integral is present in the Sacraments what we could call 'The Prime Complementarity' is studied by Theology, and Sr. Moira will develop it in detail over our three lectures.

Second, when philosophers consider complementarity "from below" we notice key moments in the history of western thought when Catholic writers seemed to address an imbalance of man-woman relation articulated by either unisex or polarity theorists and to shift the philosophical foundations a little towards a complementarity. It is this second approach from below that I will articulate using a philosophical methodology over the next three lectures. I will sketch out for you exactly how this Catholic Inspiration to articulate ever new grounds for complementarity manifested itself in western thought.

Of course we need such articulations of integral complementarity at most times. Today is no exception. When the dominant cultural model in Canada and the United States is

increasingly becoming the unisex one, with a sub-model of reverse polarity, especially among women, it is important to reflect on how close or how far they are from the components in Catholic Inspiration towards integral complementarity. In some ways, we can even say that it is urgent, because many men and women who are members of the Catholic church are tilting strongly towards unisex or reverse polarity in areas of sex and gender relations. We will try to demonstrate that integral gender complementarity is not only the truly Catholic Inspiration, but also the best theory overall because it alone can be synergetically generative on the biological, intellectual and spiritual levels. We look forward to listening to your challenges and your observations in our periods of discussion.

Now turning towards a more particular study of Ancient and Medieval Roots of a Catholic Complementarity, I would like to begin with St. Augustine (354-430) whose writings offered a mixed theory. He was a watershed of three different theories of sex identity: two inherited [an Aristotelian polarity and a Platonic unisex theory] and one discovered [a faith revelation of complementarity in Creation and in Heaven after the Resurrection of the body].

From a perspective of polarity, Augustine argued in *The Trinity* that a wife is understood as a helpmate of her husband; and thus she is not fully in the image of God when considered in her identity alone as when she is joined to him. The reverse, however, is not the case, so that the man may be considered alone as fully in the image of God.¹

From the perspective of unisex theory, Augustine stated in the *Confessions* that he preferred the Platonists to all others. Thus it is not surprising that he would think that a woman

¹ Augustine, *The Trinity* (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America, 1963), Book VII, chapter 7, p. 351.

loses her sex identity when she focuses on the higher operations of intellect in the world.

Describing his elderly mother Monica in *De Beata Vita*, Augustine said: "Upon which words, she so spoke out, that unmindful of her sex, we might think that some great man was seated with us."² The view that a woman philosopher loses her sex was common among in the Platonist tradition. Diogenes Laertius had written that one of Plato's female disciples Axiothea of Philius "is reported by Dicaerchus to have worn men's clothes" and that Hipparchia, the philosopher- wife of Crates "adopt[ed] the same dress, went about with her husband and lived with him in public."³

The Catholic Inspiration surfaced in Augustine's dramatic engagement of Revelation with logical consequences of the classical Greek polarity tradition. In *The City of God* he reflects on question of whether the claim that women is naturally inferior to men means that in the Resurrection, where all imperfections are removed, women will be turned into men. Listen to his own words:

There are some who think that in the resurrection all will be men, and that women will lose their sex.... For myself, I think that those others are more sensible who have no doubt that both sexes will remain in the resurrection. In the resurrection, the blemishes of the body will be gone, but the nature of the body will remain. And certainly woman's sex is her nature and no blemish... What our Lord said was that in the resurrection there would be no marriage. He did not say that there would be no women.⁴

² Augustine, *De Beata Vita* (Happiness — A Study) (Philadelphia: The Peter Reilly Company, 1937), 10.

³ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1941). III, 46 and VI, 96-97.

⁴ Augustine, *The City of God*

In this remarkable passage St. Augustine brings the Catholic Inspiration of complementarity into the heart of the discussion of the Resurrection: in heaven, men and women will be equal in dignity and worth, they will be significantly different, and they will be in a union of love. *turns them into glorified bodies*

The supernatural virtue of faith opened up the pathway to complementarity in the context of a tradition pulling either towards a traditional polarity in which man is thought of naturally superior to woman, or an intellectual unisex philosophy which might pull the theory towards an androgynous model for heaven. Indeed, a unisex soul was reincarnated in female or male bodies in Plato's texts. And the Platonist Christian, John Scotus Erigena (810-877) tilted back towards the unisex theory when he argued that the original Adam was a unisex being, who in the Fall became male and female, and, following out the Neoplatonic logic, at the resurrection returns to a unisex kind of being.⁵ So Augustine defends significant differentiation in his arguments about men and women in Heaven are equally perfect but significantly different through the resurrection of the body. *Human status truly in bodies. They*

St. Augustine also defended the principle of equal dignity against a cultural tradition of polarity in which a woman was often considered simply as a property of man, and especially a daughter of her father. In one situation, Augustine defended a daughter's free will against her father who wanted to force her to obey him. Augustine tells us that he wrote to the father that he would not allow him to force the daughter "unless she willingly and freely chose the better course on her own accord. Thereupon, the father began to insist with blows that his daughter *too*

⁵ John Scotus Erigena, *Periphyseon* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1976), #532-540.

obey him, which I at once forbade absolutely.⁶ For Augustine, a person's free will was a treasure of being created the image of God for both men and women. This overturned a polarity tradition in which woman was often considered simply as a property of man, and especially a daughter of her father.

A

Augustine defends woman's dignity & equality

The second example is also significant. In a culture in which a woman who had been raped was often considered by all to be 'ruined property' (a situation which led Lucretius to commit suicide). In the *City of God* St. Augustine defended the dignity of a woman when he stated: "I affirm, therefore that in the case of violent rape and of an unshakable intention not to yield unchaste consent, the crime is attributed only to the ravisher and not at all to the ravished".⁷ Although consent of the will resides in the soul of the woman, Augustine went even further to defend the purity of her wounded body: "To my cogent argument to this effect, some may venture to take exception. Against them I maintain the truth that not only the souls of Christian women [who had been raped], but also their bodies, remain holy."⁸

These examples demonstrate that even though Augustine's theory of gender identity has mixed elements of polarity and unisex, he nevertheless, boldly shifted the ground towards an integral complementarity in Heaven after the Resurrection and defended woman's identity as equal to man's with respect to effects of the exercise of the will. Thus, he serves as our first example for the Catholic Inspiration to bring a balance of gender complementarity in a broader

⁶ Augustine, *Letters* (New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1951), no. 35.

⁷ Augustine, *City of God* II 19. See also I.16, 18, 28 and II.2.

⁸ *Ibid.*

context which distorted either equality or significant difference. We could say, following *Fides et ratio* that his act of faith in assenting to the revelation of Creation and Resurrection stirred the inspiration of his reason.

The Benedictine Tradition stands out in the medieval period as opening up new avenues for sex and gender complementarity. Men and women, as celibate monks, began to share libraries and work in close relation with one another in double monasteries. They also focused on the integration of the person through work, study, and prayer. Saint Anselm (1033-1109), a Benedictine Abbot, is best known for his ontological argument for God's existence and his admiration for the Platonic tradition of philosophy. This would lead one to expect him to be attracted to a unisex model of gender identity. Yet, his prayers reveal an extraordinarily creative approach which moved towards a fractional complementarity of spiritual mothering and fathering. Always maintaining the integrity of the Holy Trinity in its internal relations of Paternity and Filiation, Anselm opened wide the two principles of equality or worth and significant differentiation in his discussion of the Divine economy. Consider the following short sequence from his long prayer to St. Paul:

Then both of you [Jesus Christ and St. Paul] are mothers. Even if you are fathers, you are also mothers. For you have brought it about that those born to death should be reborn to life — you by your own act, you by his power. Therefore, you are fathers by your effect and mothers by your affection. Fathers by your authority, mothers by your kindness. Fathers by your teaching, mothers by your mercy. Then You, Lord, are a mother, and you, Paul are a mother too.⁹

The fractional division of the complementary attributes is evident along with the ~~an~~

⁹ Anselm, "Prayer to St. Paul," in *The Prayers and Meditations of St. Anselm* (Great Britain: Penguin Books, 1973), p. 154.

Poem by St. Paul
pre
his for in expression

inspired movement towards their equality and differentiation.¹⁰ It is clear from the poem that St. Anselm discovered his inspiration for this complementarity from the depths of personal prayer. He reveals his own surprise to content of this Catholic Inspiration when he asks Jesus and St. Paul in the poem: "Why should I be silent about what you have said? What should I conceal what you have revealed? Why should I hide what you have done? You have revealed yourselves as mothers; I know myself to be a son..."¹¹

Another Benedictine, Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179), was the first western thinker to begin to elaborate a consistent philosophy of sex complementarity using the medieval science of humours and elements to describe four different types of men, four different types of women, and the ways in which these different types of persons interacted with one another in both married and chaste relations. Following his traditional polarity theory, Aristotelian cosmology had arranged the four elements in a descending order of fire, air, water, earth, and had associated the male with the two highest elements and the female with the two lowest elements. Hildegard's Catholic Inspiration brought a balance into this polarity theory by arguing that the male was associated with the highest and lowest of the elements, fire and earth, and the female with the two middle elements, air and water. She offered both theological and empirical evidence that while there was a significant difference between male and female, neither sex was superior to the other.

¹⁰ Scholars have hypothesized that Julian of Norwich (1342- c. 1420), gained great insight for her own reflections of the spiritual mothering of Christ in relation to the created world from her predecessor Anselm.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

Hildegard's typology also brought a balance into the traditional polarity theory of Aristotle which had argued that woman's lack of heat made her blood unable to concoct fertile seed, and further made her whole constitution a defective form of human life. While there is not time here to elaborate on her theory in detail, Hildegard also offered a phenomenological analysis of women's experience of men related to the preponderance of certain elements and humours. Her ideal type of men had a balance, and "with women can have an honorable and fruitful relationship. The eyes of such men can meet squarely with those of women, much in contrast to those other men's eyes [with too much of the element fire] which were fixed on them like arrows."¹² Then, offering an original suggestion of fractional complementarity Hildegard argued that these ideal men have "a wisdom that takes its beautiful self-control from the female element [air], for they are in possession of a sensible understanding."¹³ In her exegesis of Scripture, Hildegard also indicates how man and woman must become the work of each other: "Man and woman are in this way so involved with each other that one of them is the work of the other [opus alterum per alterum]."¹⁴ This calls the two complement components into an integral relation based on knowledge and love.

As we move to the Scholastic period, we discover a reassertion of all the ancient arguments for sex and gender polarity through the infusion of translations of Aristotle's works

¹² Hildegard of Bingen, *Heilkunde (Causae et curae)* (Salzburg: Otto Muller Verlag, 1957), translated by Jasmin el Kordi-Schmitt, 140.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Hildegard of Bingen, *Book of Divine Works* (Sante Fe: Bear and Co., 1987), Part One, Vision Four: 100, 123.

into the Latin world. Catholic authors discovered Aristotle through Jewish and Islamic sources and then claimed him as their own. Extensive arguments for the natural inferiority of woman begins to be promoted among philosophers once again along with some theological counter-arguments that even though woman is inferior to man by nature, she may be equal or superior by grace.

St. Albert the Great (1193-1280), a Dominican and a natural scientist based nearly all of his scientific presuppositions about woman and man on Aristotle polarity theory. He added an emphasis on the opposites, dry and moist, to the Aristotelian polarized opposites, hot and cold, to explain woman's biological inferiority to man. Albert also repeated Aristotle's conclusions that the weaker formation of the female body led to a weaker intellect in which her rational powers were without authority over her irrational powers and her appetites tended to move towards evil.

St. Albert did introduce one important qualification of the Aristotelian theory by making a distinction between particular and universal nature. The Aristotelian view that woman was an 'accidental or deformed man' (*mas occasionatus*) was limited to refer only to a woman's particular nature in which "the active element principally intends to produce the male" and when a female is born, this intention has been thwarted. Universal nature, on the other hand, "intends the female, as that without which the species cannot be saved."¹⁵ Over all, however, St. Albert did much more to promote traditional polarity than he did to move towards complementarity.

¹⁵ Albert the Great, *Quaestiones super de animalibus* in *Opera Omnia*, ed Bourgnet (Paris: Apud Ludovicum Vives, 1890-1899), Book XV, 2).

In addition, St. Albert had commissioned translations of the Aristotelian corpus from Greek into Latin. Then, the new universities in Paris, Cologne, and throughout Europe made Aristotle's corpus required reading. Thus, the Aristotelian foundation for gender polarity theory and its loss of equal dignity in favor of the natural inferiority of woman became culturally entrenched once again.

When would the Catholic Inspiration towards complementarity surface again? In several respects Albert's Dominican student Thomas Aquinas (1224-1274) tried to move the principle of equality back into the discussion of man-woman relations. While accepting the Aristotelian theory of sex polarity on the level of nature, St. Thomas developed a thorough theological framework for sex complementarity on the level of grace. He argued that two sexes were more perfect than one, in the Resurrection both sexes will be present in their perfection, differentiation, and equality, both sexes are equally capable of infused wisdom, and the perfection of the theological virtues.¹⁶

Aristotle had claimed that women were naturally inferior to men made him conclude that the friendship between a man and a woman in marriage was always between unequals. Thomas, on the other hand, argued forcefully that: "there seems to be the greatest friendship between husband and wife, because they are united not only in the act of fleshy union,...but also in partnership of the whole range of domestic activity."¹⁷ He also argued, against Aristotle, that the human and wife have a true friendship of equality; they are of one mind and

¹⁶Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* (Garden City, New York: Image Books, 1956), IV, 88,3.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, III, 123, 4-6.

one will.

In the *Summa Contra Gentiles* Thomas articulated a new theory of generation in which God made each human soul commensurate with a particular body instead of following Aristotle's logic that the female body, as an accidental or deformed reception of the male seed by the mother, determined sex identity.¹⁸ And Aquinas developed Augustine's defense of woman's bodily perfection after the resurrection at the same time as he argued against Augustine to say that a woman considered alone without her husband was also in the image of God. However, he qualified his movement towards equality of dignity and worth by adding that the female reflected the image of God less perfectly than did the male.

Still, on balance, it is evident that Thomas Aquinas is sandwiched between two very strong traditional polarity theorists: his teacher Albert, and his student, Giles of Rome (1243-1316). When viewed in this light, it is clear that the Catholic Inspiration towards complementarity was active in Thomas even though it did not achieve the result of a thorough-going defense for complementarity. Giles repeats even more rigidly than Albert or Thomas the claim that "woman is called an 'imperfect man,' a *mas occasionatus*,¹⁹ and he adds several other polarity conclusions such as: "woman's advice is of little value, for by nature, she has a defect in reason and understanding because her body is poorly formed..."²⁰

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, II, 81, 8.

¹⁹ Giles of Rome, in M. Anthony Hewson, *Giles of Rome and the Medieval Theory of Conception* (London: Athlone Press, 1975), p. 183.

²⁰ Giles of Rome, *De regimine principum* (New York: AMS Press, 1966), translated by Dominique Deslandres, folio 46: 183.

Concluding the ancient roots of the struggle for a theory of sex and gender identity inspired by the Christian Faith, we come to Dante, whose Divine Comedy incorporated so many scholastic principles. In this extraordinary work of imaginary literature, we find embodied Dante's vision that a woman is equal, if not superior to, man in intelligence and in virtue. Dante's invoking of Beatrice as his teacher in Purgatorio echoes Boethius's (480-524), the Christian Stoic's, previous model of Lady Philosophy which also placed an imaginary female figure in the position of a superior teacher of an emotional and unwise young man. Von Balthasar captures the dynamic quality of their interaction: "The fire of Beatrice burns Dante's soul to the quick and recasts it in pure light, and the immediate result is an unprecedented intimacy and boldness of access."²¹

Beatrice is both a figure of faith, leading Dante through purgatory to Paradise, in the glory of the Baptized, and she is also a figure of reason, engaging with Dante's false ideas and encouraging him towards intellectual and moral conversion: "Truly, said she, thy thought is sunk outright in error; now, if thou wilt hear me through, I shall by argument refute it quite."²² In contrast to the polarity view of the weakness of woman's reason, Beatrice is a master guide, she understands science, metaphysics, ethics, and politics, and she teaches him fundamental philosophical truths.

Furthermore, as the two companions move through purgatory to Paradise, there bodies, which are integrated with mind and spirit become progressively radiant and lighter. Dante

²¹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 3 (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), p. 61.

²² Dante, *Paradise* (Hammondsworth: Penguin Books, 1982), 64-65.

describes the changing countenance of Beatrice's body and face: "My heart from every other longing went completely free while I perused her face... Beauty past knowledge was displayed to me... Now in her beauty's wake my song can thrust its following flight no farther."²³ Beatrice turned Dante away from herself and towards Heaven where they both gazed upon God and the communion of saints: "Pure intellectual light, fulfilled with love, Love of the true Good, filled with all delight."²⁴ The gift of faith, permeated by intelligence and love poured forth in Dante's inspired new foundation for an equality of worth and significant differentiation in the complementarity relation of woman and man.

Part II: Sr. Moira Debono, RSM: Theological Aspects

²³ Dante, *Paradise*, XVIII, 13; XXX, 19-20 and 30-33.

²⁴ Dante, *Paradise*, XXX, 37-42.